

SET FREE BY TRAGEDY

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I was born in a rural community – Hor Village, Tsho drug (Cuozhou) Township, Gcan tsha (Jianzha) County, Qinghai Province, China. I graduated from Qinghai Normal University with a BA in English and Tibetan and then found my current job, teaching English at Jianzha County Number One Nationalities' Middle School. I enjoy writing stories because I think they explore social phenomena in ways that other writing can not. This story is based on a traditional Tibetan woman's life who married according to her parents' arrangement. When struck by disaster, she was first helpless, but eventually broke with tradition and achieved success, creating a comfortable life for herself and her family.

The winter sky was gray and windy. The village was wrapped in the faint smoke that poured from the chimneys of each house. The Yellow River was very blue and calm, even though a harsh wind blew across it. Despite the bad weather, I was excited and couldn't wait to visit Gang skyid from my village, Hor. Gang skyid wasn't famous, beautiful, or rich. She was a farmer, but her life experiences were worth recording and sharing.

I was full of expectations when I went to her home to interview her, but she wasn't there. She was in the *ma Ni* room, so I immediately went there. When I arrived, she was sitting in the sun, spinning a big prayer wheel by pulling a thick, old rope together with other elder women. They were holding the rope tightly as their hands moved up and down rhythmically. Tugged in this way, the huge prayer wheel rotated slowly in front of the women, as though demonstrating the eternal nature of samsara.

Gang skyid nodded slightly and thoughtfully when I asked if I could interview her. I sat down by her with a thankful face and realized her eyes were brimming with tears. I felt my throat become dry as I gazed at her. Her face creased as she closed her eyes, and tears ran down her cheeks. Wrinkles were deeply chiseled in her face, especially her forehead. I wondered how many stories were hidden in those creases. She wiped her tears away with her bony hands and began to share her life story with me.

"I was born in Hor Village. I had nine brothers and sisters. We lived happily with my parents," she began in a trembling voice. Tears welled anew as she recalled the past. I wasn't sure if her tears were from happiness or sadness, but I was convinced that she felt OK mentioning her dead parents.

She started again, "When I was twenty, my sisters and brothers married and left home one by one, leaving only me and my younger brother at home with our parents." She stopped and gazed at me, and said, "Just like me, when you come of age, you must marry and move to another village."

I started to think. Local people typically believe girls must marry, leave their family and their aging parents, and stay in their husband's home, even if they object.

When she saw I had fallen silent, she stroked my hair and said, "Child, don't worry. When I reached twenty, it was time to marry. After I finished working in the fields one day my parents informed me that I had been promised to a family in another village. I felt overwhelmed. I didn't even know the man I would live with for the rest of my life. I really..." she stopped, seemingly hurt by this memory, and then continued. "But I had to agree. I didn't want to disobey my parents." She quickened her speech, as if to avoid that part and said, "I just went there, just..." but she didn't finish her sentence. I also didn't ask her to continue.

We restarted the conversation a few minutes later. Actually, I wanted to ask her to continue immediately, but I couldn't because I felt uncomfortable making more requests. I just looked around, pretending to take interest in things happening nearby.

Realizing that I was waiting for her to continue, she scratched her head a little, shifted her hat, and said "Oh!" but then forgot where she had finished. She smiled at me shyly and asked, "Where were we?"

I answered, "You had decided to go..." but before I finished my answer, she stuck her forehead with her fist and began to talk.

"Oh, look at me, what a stupid old woman I am! That day was a sunny, auspicious day. Everybody rose early. My elder sister braided my hair, and I put on my best Tibetan robe and a coral necklace. I was surrounded by my relatives as I went to the groom's

family..." She continued, describing her wedding as briefly as possible. Then, when she finished, I thought she would continue to talk; instead she fell silent. As I looked at her expression, I got a strange feeling that I shouldn't ask what was next. I just stared at her, silently observing her face.

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The sun seemed to be in a bad mood that day, sometimes releasing all its sunshine to the earth, but sometimes hiding behind the clouds for long stretches of time. Now it began falling behind the mountains. Such moody weather always caused children to sing for the sun to appear again. Slowly, my memory pulled me back into my childhood.

When I was a young girl, I often herded goats with my younger sister in winter. We collected dung and put it in baskets we carried. Sometimes we put kids in them to carry home, too. The winter weather was capricious – sometimes sunny and sometimes overcast, like today. When we were very cold, we sang together and pleaded with the sun to appear again.

¹ཨ་མ་ནི་མ་ཤར་ཤར།
²ཤར་གྱི་བུ་མོ་གང་ཐ།
³ནགས་རྩེ་འོག་དུ་འཇུག་ཐ།
⁴ལག་གི་རེ་ཐང་ལ་ལུང་ཐ།
⁵ཨ་མ་ནི་མ་ཤར་ཤར།

¹*A ma nyi ma shar shar*
²*shar gyi bu mo grang tha*
³*nags rdza'i 'og tu 'dzul tha*
⁴*lag gi ja ne thang la lung tha*
⁵*A ma nyi ma shar shar*

¹Shine, shine mother sun.
²All the girls are frozen.
³They've run into the forest.
⁴Their bowls have fallen from their hands.
⁵Shine, shine mother sun.

When we finished singing, we would look at the sky together, hoping

the sun would reappear.

While I was swimming deeply in this childhood memory, Gang skyid called to me. I quickly stopped reminiscing, and blurted "Oh!"

"What are you thinking about? The sun has begun to set and it's time to go home, but I think we have a little more time to talk before the others leave," she said.

I knew she was worrying about her chores at home. I felt guilty and said, "I'm sorry that I disturbed you. Would you like to continue your story tomorrow?" I was sure that she would agree, but instead she began to talk.

"He and I became a couple," she said, not mentioning her husband's name. Nor did I ask his name, for it is forbidden to mention a deceased person's name. I won't write his name here, out of respect for her and her husband.

She continued, "We had two girls and a boy after we married. Seven years after our marriage, we wanted to build a new house and move out from his parents' home. And..." she stopped, trembling. "We went to get lumber from an old house. While we were inside, the roof suddenly collapsed. I was instantly covered by debris, and had no idea what was happening. I heard my husband calling me..." She stopped again, choking back tears. "He was calling my name," she went on.

"Are you OK?' he asked quietly."

"I answered quickly, 'Yes, I'm fine,' and after freeing myself, pulled the timbers off his back."

"Are you OK?' I asked worriedly."

"He didn't answer. That silence frightened me and nearly stopped my heart from beating. I felt something was wrong. My body began to go numb and cold blood flowed up my spine, making me shudder. I quickly finished moving away the timbers that covered him, and I saw him. He wasn't moving. I used all my strength to shake him, crying out his name. It didn't work. He was gone. My head began swimming. Suddenly, everything went black before my eyes. I felt as if I was falling, falling without hitting the ground. And then I don't remember anything."

"I don't know how long I lay there, but eventually people woke

me. He was gone."

She bit her lip, trying to mask her pain. Finally, she couldn't help herself, covered her mouth with her bony hand, and sobbed.

I wondered, "What would I have done had I been there?"

"Oh, my fate was so terrible," she went on, "But, one thing I couldn't accept was..." she stopped, looked straight at me, her eyes brimming with tears, and said in a strong voice, "His parents accused me of killing him and drove me out of the home."

I was shocked, wondering how they could possibly do that, but I only murmured, "Didn't they know it was an accident?"

She nodded and said, "They had lost their child. It was a calamity for them, but... did they ever think of me? I was suffering like them. I had lost my husband, but... they said..."

The sun had already set and the sky had darkened. Suddenly, a strong wind whirled dust and dry leaves around us. I realized we were both wiping our eyes – was that because we had dust in our eyes or sadness in our hearts?

"It's time to go home, we can talk tomorrow," I said quickly, disrupting her train of thought.

"Yes, that's right. I must go," she said and stood up, shaking dust out of her old robe, which made me cough. I sat quietly without saying goodbye as she left. I stared at her back as it disappeared into the distance.

"How bent her shoulders are," I thought, and then went home.

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I chatted with my mother that evening when I returned home. I told her what I had heard that day. "I can't imagine why they treated her like that," I said.

Mother nodded and told me the story of a woman from Skyang rgya, the village where she had been born and raised:

This woman married and moved into another village, into a family that treated her terribly. She didn't want to stay there, and tried to divorce her husband, but his family wouldn't agree. At a loss, she started to walk with a stoop, pretending to be disabled, and stayed inside the home all the time. Even though she had made herself useless to her husband's family, they wouldn't

grant her a divorce for three years. By that time, everybody thought she really was disabled.

The day after the divorce, her father joked, "Child, if you can straighten your back, it's time to show us." She then stood up straight and tall, which astounded everyone. Later, she said that if she had stayed stopped over like that for two more months, she really would have become a hunchback.

After Mother finished, she said, "A girl is just like a slave in her husband's home when she marries and moves in."

At that time, I wondered if I should praise such women or... I really didn't know.

Women are sensible and strong. We hide suffering in our hearts, and never boast or show our feelings in public. That's the difference between boys and girls. We don't need to belittle ourselves for being born girls. Although society gives up on us, we can live simply and independently. These thoughts ran through my head that night before I slept.

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The next day was sunny. The blue cloudless sky was like a mirror showing its radiant color to the earth. The lonely sun hung in the air without its best friends, the clouds. Mischievous children played in the dusty lanes. Some children were comparing the clothes their family had bought them for New Year, while others were counting how many candies they had been given. The fields around the village seemed to be waiting for spring. I was also waiting, waiting to hear more of the old woman's story.

I went to her two-story home. The first floor was made of stone and the second floor of wood. It was a wonderful house. Her grandson and granddaughters were playing in front of the gate. When they saw me, they shouted to their grandmother, informing her a guest was coming.

Gang skyid came rushing out to greet me. She was relaxed, and sighed when she saw me. "You startled me. I haven't prepared the house very well. Please come inside," she said, gently pushing me into a room. It was clean, but she hadn't finished sweeping. She told me that her daughter-in-law had gone to her mother's home and hadn't returned. Her son had gone to visit a relative in another village

and also hadn't come back.

She was thus alone at home with her grandchildren. She began talking as she finished her housework. "My husband's family accused me of killing him and kicked me out. I had no place to go except my natal village. After returning with my three children, we lived with my brothers and sisters, who had their own families, because by then my parents had already gone. Their living conditions were poor, and it was hard for them to feed more mouths. I knew I couldn't stay long and I also didn't want to bother them any more, although they insisted we stay in their home," she said.

"We Tibetans customarily call widows bad names and denigrate them. I knew it would be hard for me to remarry. At the same time, I knew if I didn't remarry, people would also gossip about me. I thought I could take care of the children without a man," she went on.

"I prepared to build a house near the village. I climbed the mountain to cut the lumber for the house. Although it was a man's job, I did it all myself," she said proudly. "Even though it was a small house, we lived there. At that time, cultivating fields was also a problem for me, since my boy was too young to help. Cultivating fields is usually a man's job, but I did it." She suddenly stopped, turned, and nimbly rushed outside. Before I knew what was happening, she was drawing a heavy bucket of water from their family well. I put down my notebook quickly and went over to her.

"Please rest, I'll do it for you," I said.

"No, no. It's hard work for you, but I can do it easily," she said, and pushed me away and poured the water into a tall vat. I knew it was hard work, especially for an old woman, but I didn't insist and stayed where I was. We went inside, sat down, and she continued her story.

"I was very happy living with my children, rather than living in my husband's home, although life was hard," she said, placing a big, red apple in my hands, and gesturing for me to eat. She was so generous, and I wondered how she had overcome the difficulties she faced with everyone in the village scorning her.

"How had she fed her children by herself?" I wondered, biting into the apple.

She smiled and said, "My children married and left, one by one, and the youngest one was left with me. When I saw their happy marriages, I felt content and relaxed. Then after a few years, I moved near the Yellow River before the other villagers moved here. I built a house very easily, because I didn't need to pay for the land," she said with a satisfied look on her face.

When I heard that I felt very confused. "Why?" I asked.

"Because no one cared about the land then, especially the government," she said. I nodded slightly and thought she was very smart.

She continued, "In the past, when Hor Village was still on the mountain, we also had fields here, near the Yellow River. In around 2000, most villages moved near the Yellow River, but I got here first and got the best place for free. I did construction work to earn money with my son, and gradually my family became rich. Later, my son married. He has five children and they all attend school. One is even in university. Then, we moved to Cuogankou, a huge, new village that was settled in around 2005. We built a house there and lived happily."

"There are seven hamlets in Cuogankou. At that time, the government gave fifteen Hor families places to move here. So, I got the chance to move. Now, I don't need to worry about anything. I was actually set free after I left my husband's home. Really, I feel free," she said joyfully.

I felt relaxed and inspired, but I was confused as to why I had such feelings. Then, she began cooking lunch and asked me to eat with her family, but I didn't stay. I was eager to go write up her story, which I had jotted down as she talked. The sun was already high in the sky. The wind that blew on my face and through my hair was gentle, like a spring breeze. Everything was energized. The trees were more tender and the grass greener than before. Sometimes, what seems like a tragedy can actually turn out to be a watershed in our lives, and the beginning of something wonderful. A source of sadness can become a source of strength, and a loss can become an opportunity. I felt I had new courage to face my future.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

A mdo ཨ་མདོ།

Cuogankou 措干口

Cuozhou 措周

G.yang mtsho skyid གཡང་མཚོ་སྐྱིད།

Gang skyid གང་སྐྱིད།

Hor ཧོར།

Jianzha County Number One Nationalities' Middle
School 尖扎县第一民中

ma Ni མ་ཤེ།

Skyang rgya སྐང་རྒྱ།

Tsho drug ཚོ་དུག།